

**FIRE OFFICER, THE NEED FOR MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS IN
COMBINATION FIRE DEPARTMENTS**

Executive Leadership

BY: E.L. Bud Backer,
Acting Fire Chief
Duvall-King County Fire District 45
Duvall, Washington

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Abstract

The problem was that there was no commonly adopted minimum standard for fire officers in the state of Washington. Following in the tradition of the fire service, most departments seemed to use a “what works best for us” method of determining standards for fire officers. This leads to differing standards from one department to another, and even within departments who use both career and volunteer fire officers.

The purpose of this research paper was to determine the need for minimum standards for fire officers in the state of Washington.

The questions answered by the research are:

1. What recognized standards exist for fire officers?
2. What formal training is available?
3. Should the same minimum standards be required for volunteer and career fire officers?
4. How can training be offered so it is available to both career and volunteer personnel?

Evaluative research was conducted through the review of fire service trade journals and research papers from the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg Maryland. Additional information was gathered by surveying thirty-one fire departments in the state of Washington. The departments chosen are combination and/or mid-size municipal departments.

The research conducted showed that 30% of career and 8% of volunteer officers are required to meet NFPA 1021, thus illustrating a lack of a commonly adopted standard. The

literature review portion of the research demonstrated that many chief officers believe that a common minimum standard should be adopted.

This writer recommends that NFPA 1021 be adopted as the minimum standard for all fire officers in the state of Washington. Training must be provided in a format that will be easily available to both career and volunteer personnel. It is vital that all fire officers have the necessary knowledge to safely and efficiently lead firefighters in the mitigation of emergency situations.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	4
Introduction	5
Background and Significance	6
Literature Review	8
Procedures	11
Results	12
Discussion	15
Recommendations	18
Reference List	21
Appendix	23

Introduction

The problem is that there is no commonly adopted standard for minimum qualifications for fire officers in the state of Washington. This leads to different levels of training for fire officers from one department to another, and even within departments that have volunteer and career officers. Fire officers must have the necessary knowledge to safely lead other personnel in the performance of hazardous duties.

With today's reliance on mutual aid from other fire departments, it becomes necessary to have confidence in personnel that you may seldom work with. What is more important, fire officers within a department must meet the same standards as they are performing the same functions, and face the same challenges and dangers. Having different standards for members within the same department will cause a rift between the career and volunteer members. This conflict will work against the teamwork necessary to perform firefighters' duties in a safe and effective manner. If volunteer and career personnel are required to meet the same standards, they will have a mutual respect and trust in each others abilities.

The purpose of this research was to determine the need for minimum standards for fire officers in Washington State. This study uses the evaluative research method to answer the following questions:

1. What recognized standards exist for fire officers?
2. What formal training is available?

3. Should the same minimum standard be required of volunteer and career fire officers?
4. How can training be offered so it is available to volunteer and career personnel?

Background and Significance

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) has adopted NFPA 1021, Standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications. This standard makes no differentiation between volunteer and career personnel. “A fire department member can be a full-time or part-time employee or a paid or unpaid volunteer, can occupy any position or rank within the fire department and engage in emergency operations” (NFPA 1997).

The Washington State Department of Labor and Industries now requires that fire department members who engage in emergency operations shall be trained commensurate with their duties. Actual requirements are not clearly stated, and are left to the interpretation of the local fire department.

Many states have adopted minimum standards for fire officers. Florida is one such state to have established a Fire Officer Certification Program. However, to Cavallari’s knowledge, no department has required low to mid level supervisors to attain this certification (Cavallari, 1997). Argo stated in his research that the majority of fire departments in Georgia that responded to a survey are using NFPA 1021 for its intended purpose. To what extent and how it was being used was not determined (Argo, 1993).

Sullivan stated that departments who have successfully integrated career and volunteer fire officers within the chain of command set specific written standards for all personnel to

follow. As with other departments, Sullivan's department had difficulties because career firefighters were required to take direction from volunteers. The career firefighters were, at the time of hire, the most junior members in the department (Sullivan, 1993).

Duvall-King County Fire District 45 has experienced the same problem. The department has hired the majority of career personnel from the ranks of its own volunteer force. These individuals are hired as entry level firefighters, regardless of the fact that many of them were the most experienced volunteers and held officer positions when hired full time. As was the case for Sullivan, this lead to friction between volunteer and career personnel, as the most experienced and highest trained firefighters were now junior to everyone else.

In the state of Washington, there is no standard for fire officer minimum qualifications adopted state wide. The Washington State Fire Protection Bureau does provide certification to NFPA 1001, Standard for Firefighter Professional Qualifications, for those that attend the state Fire Academy for firefighter recruit training, but no training is offered for fire officers by the State. There are several community colleges that offer an Associate Degree in Fire Command and Administration. Many fire departments in the Seattle area have made the core classes of this degree offering a requirement for company officer positions.

A survey of 31 fire departments in the state of Washington indicated that 17% of the departments have internal strife caused by different standards for personnel in like positions. Any adopted standards need to be applied to volunteer and career personnel alike, as they face the same challenges.

Firefighting has been recognized as the most hazardous occupation in North

America in terms of occupational death and injury statistics. It is for this reason

alone that the fire officer must become better educated and trained to protect the lives of those who serve as well as those that are served (Munsell, 1993, pg. 5).

Conflict occurs when different standards are used. One department may be reluctant to work with another if it is felt that their standards are lower. Worse yet, is when a combination department has different standards for volunteer and career officers. This differing application of standards will lead to conflict and divisions within the department. If fire officers are expected to attain the same outcome at an emergency incident, then those fire officers should have the same training.

Literature Review

Although there was a limited amount of literature available on this subject, the materials reviewed supported this authors theory on fire officer standards.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) first adopted NFPA 1021, Standard for Fire Officer in 1976. The NFPA has updated the standard four times since the initial adoption of this standard. This standard identifies the performance requirements necessary to conduct the duties of a fire officer. The standard further states that these performance requirements are required of any person performing duties and responsibilities of a fire officer, regardless of how much that person is paid. Volunteer and career personnel alike would conform to this standard, if adopted by the authority having jurisdiction.

In his research paper, Argo recommends that the fire service nationwide look at using NFPA 1021 for all fire officers, volunteer and career alike. His home state of Georgia, Argo

determined that the majority of survey respondents are using NFPA 1021 for its “intended purpose”. To what extent and how it was being used was not determined (Argo, 1993).

Cavallari discussed the state of Florida Fire Officer Certification Program. He stated that although the State had established the program, to his knowledge no department had yet to require low to mid level fire officers to attain this certification (Cavallari, 1997). During the literature review this author found that many states have adopted certification programs. Georgia, Iowa, New York, and Wyoming were some of the states that were found to have state certification Programs.

In his research paper, Adams states that there is a strong relationship between dual standards between volunteer and career personnel, and a decrease in morale in the department. Forming an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ conflict between the career and volunteer personnel. “In the fire service, dual standards are exemplified by one set of requirements for career personnel and another for volunteer personnel, both of whom are working toward the common goal of saving life and property.” (Cavallari, 1997, pg. 1)

In his Executive Fire Officer (EFO) report, Sullivan discusses the success of several departments that integrated career and volunteer officers within the chain of command by setting specific written standards for all officers. Combination departments can be as effective as fully paid departments as long as they have the necessary leadership of qualified officers. He also points out that people can better accept direction from others whom they feel have received proper and sufficient training (Sullivan, 1993).

Carter believes that there is no better way to anger someone than by treating people doing the same job in different ways. “Having different training requirements for volunteer and

career personnel can lead to a protected class of non-performers on either side. All people will be responding to the same incidents; therefore, all should meet a common training standard” (Carter, 1998, pg. 77). He stresses to not allow different standards of performance to occur for career and volunteer forces, and to treat everyone equally.

To paraphrase the late Author Gertrude Stein, “An officer is an officer...is an officer.” Whether you get a paycheck or not, your job is to lead, supervise and insure that the job gets done. Therefore, you will all need the same types and kinds of training to learn the job of leadership. (Carter, 1998, pg. 77)

Good reports that the Board of Fire Commissioners of Whatcom County Fire District 4 in Washington State asked why we are willing to authorize the use of uncertified company officer to lead firefighters into harms way. The Board of Fire Commissioners decided to require all personnel to comply with the NFPA standard.

Each professional standard is divided into three modules, and at the completion of each module the volunteer receives recognition for doing so. This allows recognition for accomplishing steps toward the advancement. It also helps to overcome a common negative perception that volunteers have - that it takes forever to complete certification to an NFPA standard (Good, 1997).

Stern also points out that members performing the same job should meet the same level of training. His experience shows that having separate standards for firefighters drives a wedge between the career and volunteer personnel (Stern, 1997).

Likewise, officers should be held to the same standards of training whether or not they get a paycheck. Some combination departments require their paid and volunteer officers to pass the same promotional tests or to have the same minimum numbers of years or experience before being eligible for promotion (Stern, 1997. pg. 103).

In a report written by the Fire Department Study Committee of Anne Arundel County Maryland, the importance of having one standard for all personnel was realized. The committee recommended to the county executive that NPFA 1021 be adopted throughout the county as the minimum standard for fire officer qualifications. During their research, the committee discovered that much of the friction between career and volunteer personnel was rooted in the differing standards applied to each.

The committee also recommended that every effort be made to make the necessary training available to all personnel. This meant that training sessions would have to be conducted several times and at different times. The importance of this was to provide career and volunteer personnel the opportunity to receive the training, regardless of their personal schedules (April 1994).

Procedures

Evaluative research was performed in two forms. First by sending a survey to thirty-one fire departments in the state of Washington. The departments surveyed were chosen because of their reliance on combination staffing. Of the thirty-one departments contacted, twenty-three answered and returned the surveys. It was found that two of the twenty-three had no volunteer staffing, yet they did not have a defined standard for their personnel. One limitation

of the survey was the assumption of knowledge on behalf of the person completing the survey. It was assumed that due to their fire service background, that person was aware of the requirements of NFPA 1021. A second limitation became noticeable while compiling the results of the survey. Many chief officers answered that they did not have any problems within their department due to having different standards for volunteer and career personnel. Yet informal conversations with both career and volunteer line officers from these departments indicate serious problems between the two factions. It seems that in some cases, the chief officers were unaware of, or unwilling to admit to such problems.

Further evaluative research was conducted by reviewing trade journals and research papers from the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center in Emmitsburg Maryland. Limitations encountered consisted of a lack of written material in this subject area. The majority of written material was in the form of research papers authored by previous students. The lack of published materials made it difficult to gain a great deal of information on this subject. A second limitation was the bureaucracy encountered in the King County Library System. Several weeks were lost due to the inter-library loan requests being stalled in the system.

Results

The only nationally recognized standard for fire officer qualifications is the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standard 1021, Standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications. Many states have adopted Fire Officer Certification programs. The research conducted by this author did not determine to what extent these state programs refer to NFPA 1021. Although the state of Washington has set performance requirements for both full time and reserve police officers, it has not done so for positions in the fire service.

No formal training for fire officers was found during the research. The author is aware of local efforts to provide “Officer Development Academies” in King County, Washington. This program references NFPA 1021, but does not provide certification to that level. However, this program is currently six weeks long and is not available to volunteer personnel.

Other locally available training is provided by the Washington State Community College system. A Fire Command and Administration Associate of Arts Degree is offered. This program as well, does not provide certification to NFPA 1021. It does contain many of the elements. The disadvantage is that it would take two years of full time college class room attendance to complete this program.

Of the articles and research papers reviewed, they all came to similar conclusions. That the importance of having a commonly adopted standard for fire officers was essential to firefighter and public safety. They also shared the conclusion that one standard should be applied to all personnel within a department. That volunteer and career officers alike, should meet the adopted standard. This will provide better leadership both on the fire ground and in the station house. Additionally, meeting equal standards will prevent most of the bickering that takes place between volunteer and career personnel who work together. This will lead to safer and more efficient performance of duties at the scene of emergency incidents, by providing a level of confidence in the officers as they were all required to meet certain qualifications and performance criteria.

It has been noted that achieving required training to the level of NFPA 1021, would be much more difficult for volunteers to complete. The crux of this argument is the amount of time needed to provide the training.

In determining how training could be offered so that it is available to volunteer and career personnel one article indicated that training in Whatcom County Fire District 4, in Washington State, was done with the goal of meeting the NFPA standard for the position desired. His department has divided each standard into three modules. The article stated that the benefit of this is to make accomplishing the desired end result not seem as such a long process. Other departments require personnel to gain the necessary training by taking college classes at local community colleges.

The Washington State Department of Labor and Industries now requires those fire department members who engage in emergency operations shall be trained commensurate with their duties. The requirement is not clearly defined, and is left to the local authority having jurisdiction to define.

The survey conducted of fire departments in the state of Washington had similar results. Of the responding departments, 17% stated that they had internal problems due do to differing requirements for volunteer and career personnel. The percentage of departments reporting that they had the same standards for volunteer and career personnel was 22%. Those respondents made written comments stating that they had no wide spread problems between career and volunteer personnel, because they had the same standards for all members of the department.

However, 44% of the survey respondents stated that they did not have the same standards for career and volunteer personnel, yet they reported that they had no wide spread problems between the two groups. Informal conversations with both career and volunteer officers in some of these departments indicate otherwise. This author believes that the officers

who answered the survey were not aware of or did not want to admit to a problem within their department.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there is a need for a commonly adopted standard for fire officer not only in the state of Washington, but nationally as well. Many authors point out that not having a common standard to refer to, generally creates an atmosphere conducive of different standards within organizations. This at times will lead to a “we are better than you” attitude, which will split any department. In combination departments it is vital to promote with equality and parity between career and volunteer personnel. This includes all aspects of the fire service, from training to operations and management.

Not having one standard apply to all members of the department leads to personnel having varying levels of training and experience. If a standard is not equally applied to volunteer and career personnel, a rift between the two groups will form. This is damaging not only to the department’s morale, but may also damage the department’s reputation and ability to provide service to the public as well. Any morale problems can materialize in difficulties at an incident when members of the department feel that those in leadership roles have not met the same training levels that they have. This most commonly occurs when a volunteer officer gives direction to a career firefighter who has a higher level of training and experience. Particularly, when the career firefighter has not been given the opportunity for advancement to an officers position due to the low number of career personnel in a combination department. Eventually,

this issue will be noticed by those in the public sector, and could impact the confidence level that the public has in its' department.

A second reason for requiring the same standard for all fire officers is that of firefighter and public safety. If our fire officers are to safely and efficiently lead our firefighters into harms way, then it is the responsibility of the department to ensure that these fire officers have been sufficiently trained. They must meet the same challenges in the field and face the same dangers, then why should they have different levels of training.

The fire service should also be concerned with liability issues as well. Departments may be held liable in civil courts if personnel are not trained to a defined standard. Currently an all volunteer fire department in Stanwood, Washington, is being sued by an insurance company for inadequate fire fighting techniques. The insurance company claims that poor fire fighting practices lead to the spread of a fire at a large commercial food packing plant. In today's "sue happy" society, the elected officials and administrations of the fire department must be prepared to defend their training requirements in instances like the one in Stanwood Washington.

Although the state of Washington has not required specific qualifications for fire officer, the state has required that all fire department members have training commensurate with their duties. This requirement is found in the Washington State Labor and Industries Safety Standard for Firefighters. At this time there is no definition of training commensurate with duties, given by the state. However, many people in the fire service believe that the NFPA standard for a given position will be referenced in any citations written or judgments handed down by the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries.

The survey of thirty-one fire departments in the state of Washington illustrated the differing standards required by fire departments (see appendix A). While 61% of the departments required NFPA 1001 for firefighters, only 30% required NFPA 1021 for fire officers. This fact alone shows that departments are slow to adopt standards that may take more time and effort to accomplish. While 30% of the departments that responded to the survey require NFPA 1021 for career officers, only 8% of the respondents require that volunteer officers meet this standard.

The survey asked if different standards were applied to personnel in combination departments, was there some friction between the two groups. Of the respondents, 17% stated that this was a cause of friction between volunteer and career personnel in their department. Another 44% responded that they had no difficulty between the two groups. After researching the makeup of those departments that did not report difficulty, this author determined that the reason for this was most likely the small number of career personnel. These departments generally had career personnel only in high ranking officer positions. The survey indicated a correlation between the number of and the position held by career personnel was directly related to the possibility of having morale problems between the career personnel and the volunteers. Problems seemed to occur when volunteer and career personnel held the same positions, but were not required to meet the same standards. This issue is compounded when career personnel are subordinate to volunteers who do not have as high of a level of training and experience as do the career members.

If combination fire departments are to operate safely and efficiently, the people in that department must work together as a team. Team members must have trust and respect for each

others abilities and be able to rely on each other without hesitation. Good leadership is a key component in providing a team that works well together. It is the fire officer that fills the leadership role.

Operating at an emergency incident requires quick responses based on training and experience. The likelihood of unsafe or inefficient acts increases when fire crews are being lead by unqualified personnel. It is the responsibility of the fire service to provide fire officers that will safely lead the fire crews in efficiently conducting their assigned tasks.

All fire officers working at an incident should meet the same minimum qualifications. When a chief officer is assigning tasks to fire officers, the abilities of those fire officers should not come into question. The only way to provide for this level of confidence is to require that all fire officers meet the same minimum standard.

Recommendations

It is recommended that minimum qualifications be established for professional standards for fire officers. The National Fire Protection Association has adopted NFPA 1021, Fire Officer Professional Qualifications. As it stands today, this is the only nationally recognized standard that exists. NFPA 1021 is a well-founded standard that applies equally to all fire officers, career or volunteer.

This author recommends that the Washington State Fire Protection Bureau adopt NFPA 1021 as the minimum standard for fire officers in the state of Washington. The author also recommends to the Board of Commissioners of Duvall-King County Fire District 45 that NFPA 1021 be adopted as the minimum standard for fire officers within the author's

department. The department should persuade others in the region to also adopt the standard, and eventually pressure the state into adopting the standard statewide.

It is also recommended that training be provided so that it is easily available to both career and volunteer fire personnel. Training sessions should be offered more than once, and at different times. Training sessions during the day will be easily taken by career personnel, while night and weekend classes will be easier for volunteers to attend. Administrations must be ready to assume the cost of this training. Overtime may be needed for career personnel who are unable to attend classes while on shift. In order to make classes available to volunteers, the class may need to be offered on more than one occasion. It may need to be offered on weeknights and again on weekend days. The classes must be offered so that volunteers can work them into their schedule.

One way to spread the cost and allow for classes being scheduled multiple times would be to have several departments share the load. If a class can be offered on weeknights at one department and on weekends at another, this will allow the cost of providing the class to be shared by the departments. When doing so, members of the participating departments may attend classes at any of the locations they are offered at.

The example of Whatcom County Fire District 4 could be followed in dividing the standard into three modules. This will allow for people to incrementally work towards completion of the entire standard. It will improve morale while working towards completion of the standard as personnel may be recognized for accomplishing each module. This is particularly important to the volunteers as the class work must be done in their “spare time”.

By recognizing peoples' efforts at the completion of each module, they will be rewarded and it will reduce the feeling that it takes forever to meet the training requirements of the NFPA 1021.

Meeting the requirements of NFPA 1021 should be required for all personnel, volunteer and career alike. It is recommended that departments not allow different standards of performance to occur for career and volunteer personnel. All personnel should be treated equally and be required to meet a common standard of performance. This will eliminate morale issues and disagreements between the two groups. People are easily angered if they feel that a people doing the same job are being allowed to conform to a different standard. This fact was not only discussed in the literature reviewed, but was mentioned as the reason for success by several of the survey respondents.

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Appendix A

Fire department _____ Date _____

Person completing survey _____

Rank _____

Department information full paid _____ combination _____ volunteer _____

municipal _____ fire district _____

number of career uniformed personnel _____

number of volunteer/part-time uniformed personnel _____

number of alarms in 1997 _____

Does your department require NFPA 1001 for Firefighter positions.

Does your department require NFPA 1021 for Fire Officers.

Does your department require an AA degree for Fire Officers.

Does your department require a BA or BS degree for Chief Officers.

For career	For volunteer \ part time

If your department is a combination department and you have different standards for career and volunteer/part-time personnel, does this cause friction between the two groups?

YES NO

Please return survey to: Acting Chief Bud Backer
 King County Fire Dist. 45
 PO Box 338
 Duvall, WA 98019

or by fax to (425) 788-0199

